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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 5449
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 6573
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3187
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA PRIORITY 0278
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 4721
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2393
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3628
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000788

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: MUSLIMS SEEK RECOGNITION IN NEW CONSTITUTION

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires, a.i., Jeffrey Moon. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Nepal's Muslim community is seeking official recognition in the new constitution as a way to guarantee their religious rights. Muslim leaders in Nepal see India as a model for structuring religious affairs in a democracy. Madrasas throughout the Terai operate through loose, independent endowments (primarily from India) that lack standardized curricula or Ministry of Education supervision. Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca is fraught with difficulty and frustration. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Charge hosted a lunch August 19 for four senior Muslims, including Akbal Ahmad Shah, Constituent Assembly (CA) Member from the Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF); Mohammad Mikrani, Chairman of the Center for Development and Research (CEDAR); S.M. Habibullah, Member of the MPRF's Military Integration Committee; and Mohammadi Siddiqui, CA Member from the Nepali Congress (NC) Party.

Muslim Origins in Nepal

¶3. (SBU) Nepal's last census (2001) officially recorded a Muslim population of 4.27 percent, though Muslim leaders argue they traditionally have larger birth rates and have historically been under-counted in the Hindu-dominated nation; they estimate that 8-10 percent of Nepal's population is Muslim. The Muslim population is almost exclusively Sunni and based in Nepal's southern Terai region bordering India. The first wave of Muslim migration to Nepal (via India) began in the 14th century with much smaller waves arriving after eradication of malaria in the Terai in the 1950s.

Equal Rights as an Ethnic Group

¶4. (C) Muslim leaders told Charge that, unlike Nepal's other minority groups, they are not interested in gaining an autonomous state in Nepal. Their main ambition is explicit recognition in the new constitution as an official traditional ethnic group with rights equal to those of other Nepali ethnic groups. They said the major political parties were only considering Muslims as a religious group, whereas being Muslim in Nepal is an ethnic identity as well. MPRF's Habibullah said that during 240 years of Hindu monarchical rule, Muslims endured both cultural and institutional marginalization and discrimination. The Muslim community now

looks forward to a new era of democracy and inclusiveness. Habibullah and Siddiqui believe India is a useful model for religious pluralism, one that guarantees Muslim rights allowing them to practice a limited form of shariah, specifically for family law issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property rights.

Islamic Education

¶5. (C) The madrasas spreading throughout the Terai currently operate through a loose, donation based system with most financial endowment from private Indian donors and some limited financial support from Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Shah told Charge that he recently traveled with UNICEF to visit and assess the status of madrasas in the Terai. He described the current situation as largely unregulated. He and other Muslim leaders envision a state-sponsored system through the Ministry of Education that would centralize Islamic curriculum and standardize teaching.

Pesky Pilgrimage Problems

¶6. (C) Shah, who was formerly head of the Hajj Central Committee, told Charge the government does not take Muslims seriously. He gave an example of the Hajj Committee and told how despite best efforts getting Nepali government cooperation to charter planes to Mecca, there was always a last-minute crisis and subsequent scramble that resulted in flying Pakistan International Airways as a substitute solution.

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Comment

¶7. (C) Muslim leaders, like all of Nepal's historically disenfranchised minorities, are eager to codify their rights in an emerging democracy that theoretically promises them better representation. They are still minor players though their immediate goals are perhaps more tangible than those of other ethnic groups who have hopes of independent provincial states.

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